



AD HOC OPEN GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

REPORT: Results of Interviews with Committee Members

January 7, 2016

Overview

Margaret Norton-Arnold, facilitator for the Ad Hoc Open Government Committee, conducted telephone interviews with all committee members between December 18 and December 22 2015. The nine members shared their perspectives on the upcoming work of the group, including their values for the City of Snohomish, particular issues they have identified that should be addressed by the committee, and their hopes for what the committee will be able to accomplish. They also had some questions about the upcoming process. All committee members are enthusiastic about serving on the group, and are pleased to have been selected to perform this task for the City of Snohomish.

The following is a brief synopsis of the interview results. The committee will build on this summary during discussion at their first meeting on Monday, February 1, 2016.

Backgrounds and Perspectives

While there are age differences among members, all have lived in Snohomish for a number of years. They value the small-town feel of the city and its historic character. At the same time, they realize that the City must be open to growth and change. Members include students, career professionals, civic activists, retirees, and business people.

Some committee members feel that city officials need to do a fundamentally better job of communicating and involving the public. They point to some key times when this has not been the case, and are eager to make recommendations to help rectify these situations. In general, they believe that a set of public engagement protocols should be established to ensure that the public is as well-informed and engaged as possible with regards to key governmental decisions.

Other members do not feel that city officials have acted unwisely; they believe that, in general, city leaders do the best job possible in attempting to keep the public interested and informed in issues. A few with experience in government jobs note that it can be very difficult to encourage interest from the public, especially in attending public meetings and other events. While they acknowledge that there are some improvements that might be made to foster a greater sense of transparency in governmental proceedings, these members don't believe that the entire public involvement program needs to be overhauled.

In addition to these perspectives, a couple of members expressed values they hope the committee will address through its recommendations, including greater appreciation toward the diversity of Snohomish citizens, tolerance and equality, and an open and inclusive government that encourages all Snohomish residents and business owners to fully participate in governmental issues and decisions.

Purpose and Role of the Committee

Most committee members had read the draft committee charter distributed by Margaret, and were generally in agreement with all of the charter's elements. However, members also wanted to hear a clear statement of their purpose directly from City Council members. Specifically:

- 1) What is the problem you want us to solve?
- 2) How will you assess our work? How will we know if we are on track with our recommendations?

In addition, all committee members want to make sure their work results in a set of very concrete recommendations to the City's leaders; they want the committee's final product to be clear and specific.

Motivating Events

Most committee members cited two or three events they believe have caused at least some portion of the city's residents to lose confidence in their governing officials. The general sense among members is that these issues could have been handled more effectively.

- The proposed A-Pod-ment development.
- The proposed cell phone tower.
- The proposed Parks District.

Downtown parking was another area mentioned as a somewhat contentious issue. In contrast, one member said that a striking success of the City has been the Riverwalk and linkages to the Centennial Trail – these are strongly supported and appreciated by City residents.

Suggestions for Improvements to Public Communication and Engagement

Members had a number of ideas for how the City might improve its efforts in communication and engagement.

- The website could be improved – it is difficult to find information; it could be easier to access specific topics. Information about City Council meetings is often posted on the Friday before a Tuesday meeting; this does not give people enough time to learn about these issues and attend the Council meeting if they are interested.
- The City should educate people on what it means to be involved in government and should actively encourage their participation. People have to be invited in, and welcomed, to participate.
- City leaders need to demonstrate that they are actively listening to people, and they need to be clear on when and how the suggestions of the public have been incorporated into their decision-making. There needs to be a clear path of what happens to the suggestions, when and how they are used.
- Business leaders want to be more involved, but they don't know how or where to go for information; they don't understand the avenues to being informed and involved.

- City Council meetings are poorly attended. From the size of the audience, it doesn't seem like very many members of the public are interested in what is going on. There has to be more of an effort to "keep it interesting," really let people know what government is doing and why the decisions they make are important to everyone.
- Committee members need to participate in researching any innovations that are out there that help to better inform people and keep them interested and engaged. There must be some new techniques that actively reach and motivate people to participate.
- The sandwich boards that the city uses to inform people of impending developments are small, hard to read, and poorly positioned.
- Communication on any issue needs to happen as early as possible, so people have time to get educated and determine how they can best be engaged.
- It's impossible to please everyone 100% of the time, but it would be nice to know that the City is operating at the top of the bell curve as much as possible – doing its best to really reach out and engage people, with leaders demonstrating that they are actively listening, and responding to, what people have to say.
- We need to help ensure that the public fully understands that our elected officials are not operating behind closed doors – that our government is fully transparent and open in terms of its decision-making.

Reflections on the Committee Process

A few members commented on the elements that contribute to, or detract from, successful committee process.

- It's important that all members be as open-minded and positive as possible. It doesn't help to come in with a lot of preconceived notions. We want honest, open conversations and productive dialogue.
- Bullies are destructive; one person who wants to dominate the conversation and who insists on having everything his or her own way. The facilitator needs to be able to manage this.
- It's counterproductive when people get mad and then shut down – refuse to participate. It's important for everyone to stay engaged.